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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

CHIEFS OF STAFF COMMITTEE

THE RATIONALE FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM
STRATEGIC NUCLEAR DETERRENT FORCE

Note by the Secretary

1. The Chiefs of Staff have approved (1) the report (2) at Annex A and have agreed to forward it to the Secretary of State as an expression of their views.

B G T STANBRIDGE
Air Commodore
Secretary
Chiefs of Staff Committee

Annex:

A. The Rationale for the United Kingdom
Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Force. (19 pages)

Notes:

1. COS 15th Meeting/72, Minute 121.
2. DP 11/72 (Revised Final).

Ministry of Defence
Main Building
Whitehall, SW1

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ANNEX A TO
COS 45/72

THE RATIONALE FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM STRATEGIC
NUCLEAR DETERRENT FORCE

INTRODUCTION

1. Current Government policy is that we should possess a strategic nuclear capability; studies are in hand on the form that this should take in the future and the degree of collaboration with other nations which may come to appear politically and technically desirable or essential. Decisions have also been made or are pending on the matter of United Kingdom nuclear weapons systems and delivery means relevant to nuclear action below the level of strategic response (1). For the United Kingdom to continue to be a nuclear power will inevitably involve large expenditure over a considerable period.

2. It is therefore timely to consider once again what are the advantages to the United Kingdom - and to some of its allies - of our possession of a strategic nuclear deterrent. Not only is a restatement of those advantages desirable in terms of argument for the money involved; it may also help to point towards certain specific solutions as being more conducive to those advantages than would be others.

3. We do not consider these solutions in this paper, which is deliberately concerned only with rationale. Separate work is going on in parallel on the subject of the options which the United Kingdom may have in considering the next generation of strategic nuclear systems. When this work is to hand there will need to be tackled very difficult problems of priorities in Defence in the light of the money available. The paper which follows is intended to set the scene for consideration of these options, and not to pre-empt conclusion. It is, in our view, impossible to form a judgement on priorities without a clear sense of what the advantage to the United Kingdom of a strategic nuclear capability is or is not.

AIM

4. To review the need for the United Kingdom to retain a strategic nuclear deterrent force into the next generation and the level of threat such a force would need to pose to be effective.

SCOPE

5. It is necessary to bear in mind that this paper is written from the point of view of a nation which is already a nuclear power. Argument might take a different form were we approaching the question of whether to become one. Although, therefore, we approach the matter of the United Kingdom strategic deterrent

Note:

1. MO 18/3 of 5 January 1972.

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force from first principles, these might have a very different slant - and the attitude of our allies could be very different - were the historical position not what it is.

6. Since in the timescale with which we are concerned the principal likely threat is that from the Soviet Union, our review is confined to the relevance of the United Kingdom's strategic nuclear deterrent capability to the European theatre. Nevertheless when we come to examine the level of effectiveness required we include some consideration of its value for deterring other potentially hostile powers.

7. We first of all review the philosophy of nuclear deterrence per se and then relate this to the situation of the United Kingdom as a member of the Atlantic Alliance. We then go on to examine the implications of the United Kingdom possessing a deterrent capability first in the national context and secondly from the international aspect. We finally discuss the characteristics and level of effectiveness which a United Kingdom strategic deterrent will require.

PHILOSOPHY OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Strategic Weapons

8. For the purpose of this paper we use the following definition:

"Deterrence implies the evident ability to inflict on the Homeland of a potential aggressor a degree of damage he would not regard as tolerable in the context of the objectives he might wish to obtain; together with the creation of sufficient belief in his mind that this damage might, in fact, be inflicted."

9. There is no universal and absolute criterion of what sustains effective deterrence. This paper concerns deterrence applicable to a leading power of the second rank - the creation of a state of mind in the potential enemy which will deter his aggression. Deterrence is not concerned with the use of nuclear weapons because by definition if war occurs deterrence has failed. It is concerned, therefore, not with the course of hostilities but with their prevention.

10. The ultimate reason for the possession of strategic nuclear weapons by any Western nation is to ensure its own independence and survival by deterring attack on itself; the deterring of attack on those allies whose security is involved with its own may be a motivating factor but not the ultimate one.

11. In the first instance strategic nuclear weapons, provided that their second strike capability is generally assumed to be

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effective and sufficient, can clearly and credibly have a deterrent effect against strategic nuclear attack upon the possessor's homeland.

12. In the second place strategic nuclear weapons provide one of the elements of deterrence against conventional attack. There are two qualifications to this thought. First, it may be argued that the deterrent effect of the strategic weapon diminishes as the enemy threatens objectives less essential to the security of the possessor. Second, as a corollary, strategic nuclear action as a response - or threatened response - to conventional attack upon an ally's territory rather than the possessor's own may reasonably be regarded as less credible. "Credible" means "credible at all times in the face of the enemy capabilities". The credibility level is therefore inevitably high.

13. However, some capability for strategic nuclear action, because it constitutes the upper limit of military response, is clearly not only one of the elements of deterrence against conventional attack but the crowning element, since it alone can threaten the homeland of the aggressor with unacceptable damage. Deterrence, in the round, consists in providing for those measures which can make that threat credible, and is weakened by any measures - or lack of them - which could reduce credibility.

14. We turn now to the question of deterrence within an alliance and consider it in a European and NATO context.

15. NATO strategy is generally conceived as being inseparable from what is often referred to as the "United States nuclear guarantee". In considering our own nuclear capability - or that of any ally except the United States - it is necessary to examine this "guarantee", since the first question it induces in the mind is whether there is any justification for duplicating or adding to the United States' capability.

16. There are many shades of attitude to this question. It may be useful to set out the extreme positions. The first, which might be called the Solidarity argument, is that of those who believe the United States strategic nuclear capability absolutely sufficient and absolutely dependable in the context of European Defence. Its rationale runs as follows:-

a. The Alliance is based on the principle that an armed attack upon one of its members in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all (2).

b. The security of the Alliance is dependent upon the credibility, in Soviet eyes, of United States involvement in the defence of Europe at levels of conflict up to and including the strategic nuclear exchange.

Note:

2. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

c. United States' interests in Europe - economic, strategic and ideological - can be counted on to continue; moreover, those interests, coupled with the continued and evident possession of a valid deterrent, are sufficient to make any attack on Europe appear an unacceptably risky proposition to the Soviet leaders.

d. Any measures to provide or maintain "alternative insurance policies" against the possibility of the United States coming to the conclusion that their own national security is less bound up with Europe, or against United States' reluctance to escalate conflict for fear of retaliation against America, could be counter-productive, and could lead to the very tendencies they would seek to offset. Dependence, in other words, is safer than any measures of independence, and must be demonstrated to friend and enemy alike.

From these premises, and especially from d, it can also be argued that:

e. The provision or retention by any member of the Alliance, apart from the United States, of a strategic nuclear capability of any kind is unnecessary, runs counter to rational principles of distribution of effort within the Alliance, represents a waste of resources and may encourage Soviet leaders to conclude that the minor allies in NATO have some sound reason for distrusting the stated level of US commitment to the Alliance.

17. The other, opposing, view might be called the argument of Ultimate Self-interest, namely:

a. No nation can be expected to risk self-immolation (the possible price of strategic nuclear action in an age of second-strike capability) to ensure the territorial integrity of an ally, however close that ally.

b. No nation, therefore, can be absolutely relied upon to accept the risks inherent in escalating conventional conflict to the strategic nuclear level on behalf of an ally, unless its own existence is clearly and inevitably threatened as a result of that attack.

c. It follows that the United States has the strongest motive of all the allies to prevent a European conflict escalating to the strategic nuclear level (since America's territorial integrity is only at risk at that level).

d. Thus it could reasonably appear dubious to an aggressor, calculating from the argument of American ultimate self-interest, that the United States would actually use strategic

nuclear weapons. (These doubts could be accentuated by developments in SALT and by any reduction in the United States' conventional forces in Europe, whether offset by similar Soviet reductions or not). Deterrence therefore would be defective and aggression the more conceivable.

e. The United States' interest cannot in perpetuity be assumed, and no Alliance lasts for ever.

From these premises two parallel and fundamental points can also be derived:

f. No nation without actual and physical ability to escalate the conflict to the level of effective strategic nuclear action has the ultimate ability to defend itself against a nation with that power.

g. Deterrence in the context of Soviet action against Europe - including the United Kingdom - is defective unless the power to escalate the conflict is actually possessed by at least some European nations whose territory is at risk; and those nations, in the last resort, are likely to be secure from external attack against themselves, only provided that their retaliatory strategic capability is effective and can be seen to be able to survive; and that there is the will to use it.

18. Paragraphs 16 and 17 above deliberately expose two extreme positions. The steps which compose them do not all preclude the reaching of other conclusions. It is, for instance, perfectly possible to believe warmly in the necessity that United States involvement in Europe should remain credible at every level and still to deduce that an additional insurance policy is, nonetheless, desirable. Conversely a belief in the argument of ultimate self-interest need not involve a belief that United States interest and involvement in Europe will not remain powerful for a long time. Nevertheless the two extremes drawn to the ultimate are mutually exclusive. We return to this point when we come to consider the United Kingdom position.

Tactical Use

19. Where the tactical use of nuclear weapons is concerned, it is for consideration whether the sort of ranges and sizes of the weapons generally implied by "tactical use" necessitate separate argument, or whether their use is subsumed in the main debate whose extreme limits have been set out above. While we appreciate that such weapons could be used by the Soviet Union on, for example, airfields and other military targets in the United Kingdom, we see no possibility of separating by definition such strikes from those on other targets; and we do not believe that nuclear strikes on this country could be classified as other than strategic.

In the context of this paper we therefore define "tactical use" as use which does not strike the territory (as opposed to the forces) of a nuclear power. The United States' distinction between "strategic" and "theatre" conflict has little meaning to a European nuclear power. While, therefore, actual response to purely military strikes against the United Kingdom might well differ from those appropriate to retaliation in the face of a general nuclear attack, we do not argue that to deter this contingency demands a specific capability additional to or apart from that which we classify as "strategic" on the one hand or as "tactical" upon the other.

20. Our own capabilities defined as "tactical" currently include weapons designed for comparatively deep strike as well as for battlefield use. We are, therefore, equipped to respond in kind to this sort of attack or to initiate it were such escalation appropriate. This paper, as earlier stated, concerns deterrence and not use.

21. The function of tactical nuclear weapons (ie weapons designed primarily for their direct effect upon the conventional battle) in NATO strategy is to provide an essential link between conventional defences and the strategic nuclear weapon systems (3), thus strengthening the deterrent effect of the former and the credibility of the latter. Tactical nuclear weapon systems are deployed in close association with conventional forces. The enemy must therefore recognise the risk that, if he should attack at a level which NATO could not hold conventionally then NATO, under pressure, might use the nuclear weapons deployed. Their presence in the defensive systems therefore faces an enemy with an imponderable risk of escalation, since once the nuclear threshold has been crossed the conflict enters a new dimension in which the risk of involvement of strategic weapons against the aggressor's homeland cannot be ruled out. The significance of tactical nuclear weapons therefore lies not so much in their potential operational effectiveness as in their contribution to the deterrent. Their possession helps to deter an aggressor from initiating an aggression in the hope of achieving quick success by conventional means alone; their use by NATO could also deter the continuance or widening of a conventional aggression already under way.

22. As in all nuclear matters, however, the initiator's risks are high, and it must be credible that the initiator - in the context of this discussion by definition the defender - would himself be prepared to face the risks of escalation.

23. It is possible to argue that credibility in the field of tactical use is different in kind from the issue of credibility in strategic use, simply because tactical use itself implies a deliberate restraint from strategic use - a deliberate avoidance, in fact of striking the homeland of the only nuclear power at present opposed to us. It can be argued therefore that whereas

Note:

3. DPG/D(69)58 (Revised).

a nation like the United States which is critically vulnerable only to strategic nuclear attack and not to other forms of attack, has every incentive to keep conflict below the strategic level, it has less incentive to keep it below the level of obvious tactical use; that tactical use is therefore only a limited indicator of a willingness to contemplate strategic use and is thus not a dominant factor in deterrence.

24. Nevertheless it is generally accepted that the tactical use of nuclear weapons, by crossing a threshold, introduces a new and potentially cataclysmic dimension to the conflict and if it carries increased hazard of escalation to the strategic level (or is sufficiently believed so to do) the same factors of credibility will apply, albeit in diminished degree, as apply to strategic use. It is not considered therefore that the question of the tactical use of nuclear weapons introduces a new chain of argument. It suffices to say that to be able to use nuclear weapons in this way is an essential element in the current strategy of deterrence.

THE UNITED KINGDOM POSITION

25. In view of the need to sustain political solidarity with our NATO allies, and of criticisms of an "independent" capability on grounds of superfluity, the United Kingdom has tended presentationally to minimise "independence" and emphasise publicly that the British deterrent is an adjunct to the United States capability as a NATO declared force (although we still provide the only nuclear capability organic to CENTO). Nevertheless, as specifically recognised in the Nassau Agreement, our capability for independent action has been retained, despite the basic factor of our heavy dependence on the United States for material support and our reliance on them for Intelligence.

26. The United Kingdom position can be said, therefore, to be somewhere between the parameters given in paragraphs 16 and 17 above. The description of our nuclear capability as declared to NATO and, on occasions, as an adjunct to United States' capabilities would argue a belief in the Solidarity argument. No British Government however, has drawn the conclusion from this that our capability is unnecessary and redundant. This surely suggests, however stated, a belief in the argument of Ultimate Self-interest. In our view therefore an unqualified belief in the Solidarity argument cannot be sustained while simultaneously endorsing our present policy.

27. This is unsurprising since we find the Solidarity argument extended to the ultimate essentially unconvincing. As we have said, although the United States involvement in Europe is a vital element in the Alliances' deterrent strategy, it would be mistaken to place too much emphasis on what such involvement implies; we have already referred to the United States having a great incentive to keep conflict to the conventional - or, at the most

tactical use - level since she is ultimately threatened only by strategic nuclear action. On the other hand, her allies could be threatened not only by that, but also by conventional air attack, invasion or blockade which they have not the conventional forces successfully to resist. They, therefore, have less disincentive to contemplate escalation. United States military authorities acknowledge this issue frankly and regard the achievement by the Soviets of parity in strategic nuclear power as likely to inhibit United States' decision-makers from taking action which might escalate to the level of strategic exchange in any context apart from a direct threat to the security of the United States itself.

28. Secondly, it is impossible to believe that the United Kingdom strategic nuclear capability makes any significant contribution to deterrence if seen purely as a subordinate element of United States' power. The continuance of a United Kingdom nuclear capability of any kind, purely on the military grounds of adding quantitatively to the striking power available to the Alliance would be very hard to justify; the United States' capability is too massive and the United Kingdom's contribution too minor for the military argument alone to run. The United Kingdom capability is significant only because it is under separate national control and because it thus presents an added factor of uncertainty. Moreover, in the NATO context, the United Kingdom's will to escalate to use of strategic nuclear weapons because, like France, we could not ultimately and in all circumstances defend ourselves by conventional means, might be regarded as more credible than that of the United States; at least the second centre of decision complicates the Soviet calculation of risks and deterrence is thereby enhanced.

29. Nevertheless it can be contended that the foregoing argument is to make too much depend on speculation about United States' policy. It can be argued that although logic implies that American reactions and decisions might be as described above, the real issue is whether the Soviet Union could possibly take the risk that it were so. The existence of the massive United States capability must, it can be contended, inhibit the Soviet Union from any adventure touching major American interests, even if pure reason might suggest that an American response would itself be suicidal. Is not even a small measure of doubt sufficient, therefore, to justify the Solidarity argument?

30. We acknowledge the force of this. We consider, however that to depend on such an argument involves a major risk. It is at least as conceivable that the Soviet Union might, one day, (and we are considering an extremely long timescale) come to believe that American strategic nuclear reaction to a - perhaps limited - European adventure would be so irrational an act in the light of the dangers to America and the comparatively low level of American interests directly involved that American inaction could be assumed. The assumption might be erroneous; but we find it credible that, in certain circumstances, it might be made. In these circumstances our own existence could be directly at risk.

31. We conclude, therefore, that it is the argument of Ultimate Self-interest - the argument in national terms - which does and should justify, as it always has really justified, our nuclear capability. Without this capability we are absolutely dependent upon the Alliance and in the last resort, on the United States' will to provoke her own destruction on our behalf. This is the situation of all other European members of the Alliance, except France. All these arguments presuppose the ultimate ability of the British Government to use the deterrent independently if necessary in defence of vital interests; and it has been our consistent policy even within the Alliance to retain the ability to do so.

32. It may, however, also be suggested that if the United States capability is inadequate because her will might, in certain circumstances, be assumed to be deficient, so might the will of the United Kingdom. It may be asked why the situation of the United Kingdom (in the context not of a nuclear attack upon itself, but of conventional aggression in Europe) differs from that of the United States and why its capability should be regarded as credible. We discuss this in the next part of our paper where we consider the international position.

THE INTERNATIONAL POSITION

General

33. We have given our view that the major justification for a British strategic nuclear deterrent is that of ultimate national self-interest. This is not to imply that this essentially national position is not also highly relevant in a NATO context, and in this part of our paper we consider this aspect, as well as the likely attitudes of our principal allies to the possession of our own nuclear capability.

34. In the time scale which we are considering, it is possible to envisage (in or outside the context of MBFRs) that the US might reduce their forces in Europe to a level which might seriously bring into question the validity of the US strategic nuclear guarantee to NATO. We have already argued that in any case this has a certain inherent incredibility. It might further be weakened by SALT or developments from it. In this situation the deterrent posture of the Alliance and the validity of the current NATO strategy would be gravely at risk were one or more European nations not to possess a strategic nuclear capability.

35. This could be provided by one nation nominally "held in trust" for Europe, or by a deterrent force jointly funded and jointly

controlled by European Governments. Since the latter, however, presupposes some degree of political integration which is not yet in sight, we do not consider it further in this paper. We believe that strategic nuclear forces are and in the foreseeable future will remain, essentially responsive only to national decisions in the last resort; and unless or until Europe becomes a nation we do not consider that the concept of a European deterrent has a meaning. This, however, may evolve as the concept of Europe itself evolves: and we refer to this again below.

36. There is however a further argument here. If there should be sufficient misgiving about the "United States nuclear guarantee" to justify measures of insurance against it - and, as stated above, United States military authorities regard such misgiving as entirely realistic - it can be argued that the best insurance policy might not be the prolongation of an alternate strategic nuclear capability but improvements to Europe's conventional and tactical nuclear capability to the point where they were sufficiently effective in deterrent terms to lessen the significance of the strategic nuclear arm.

37. This is probably the course which the United States would prefer us to adopt. Apart, however, from the question of whether real differences in the order of magnitude of conventional and tactical nuclear forces could be made for the same money, this course is open to the fundamental objection that the European nations, exposed to a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, must be vulnerable to strategic nuclear blackmail, whatever the effectiveness of their conventional and tactical nuclear forces, unless there were available to them the power to respond.

38. In Europe only France and the United Kingdom possess strategic nuclear deterrent forces. Of the remaining nations only Germany and Italy have the resources to develop a credible nuclear deterrent capability. Germany is inhibited by the Paris Agreement of 1954 and her possession of nuclear weapons would be anathema not only to the Soviet Union, but also to the rest of Europe and indeed to a wide range of opinion in Germany itself; while the strength of the Communist Party in Italy would thwart any attempt by that country to acquire an independent deterrent.

39. France clearly states that her deterrent must remain firmly under national control - an entirely logical position. But she is also ostentatiously aloof from NATO and although it is always possible that a change of personalities in the French Government could bring a change of attitude, a reversal of policy would have to confer significant advantages on the French and there are no immediate signs of it. In the absence of any change in French policy therefore, only the United Kingdom of European countries could provide a strategic deterrent ostensibly "for NATO".

40. It might be argued that this is unconvincing; that the facts of geography place Britain in a similar position to the United States, with interests in Europe, but physically separated by the sea. There are, however, essential differences. The United Kingdom is sufficiently close to the European members to be vulnerable to conventional attack from Warsaw Pact bases. This vulnerability would be increased should the rest of NATO Europe be overrun by Warsaw Pact forces. Furthermore the pressure that could be brought to bear by a Soviet dominated Continent, financially, industrially, and psychologically as well as militarily would probably be more than our isolated country could indefinitely withstand. Thus our future is inextricably joined with that of Europe. In this manner we differ from the United States and it can more credibly be argued that our own vital interests include the protection and preservation of those continental countries with whom we are allied and that our physical security is absolutely interwoven with theirs, and can be seen to be so.

41. This argument must surely gain even more force in the context of an evolving European community. The closer the integration of the Western European nations the more convincing must appear (in Soviet eyes) British capability in a Western European context. Whereas, therefore, it might be argued today that the Soviet Union might gamble on the United Kingdom remaining quiescent in the face of attack in Europe, it must appear to them a greater gamble as our integration in Western Europe develops.

The United States' Position

42. In an ideal world the United States would no doubt have preferred a situation in which alternative centres of nuclear power did not exist within the Alliance. The problems of risk-calculation and escalation could then have been considered on a simple bilateral basis and NATO nuclear decisions would have remained entirely within their own control. Almost since the beginning of the Alliance, however, the United States has had to accept the existence of a strategic nuclear force possessed by the United Kingdom and their attempts to prevent the emergence of a French force proved in the end counter-productive. Whatever may be their views about the effectiveness and desirability of these independent forces, they cannot expect them to disappear for many years; they remain factors which United States' calculations have to take into account.

43. In the longer term, however, they may begin to see positive value in the existence of such forces. Over this period the credibility of the United States' nuclear guarantee may well become eroded, as the result of developments in SALT and reductions in the scale of the United States' conventional presence in Europe as well as by the inherent doubts we have already described above. The resulting military and psychological gap in Western security is, as has been said, unlikely to be offset completely by increased European efforts in the conventional field. It could, however, be counterbalanced if an effective and credible nuclear deterrent capability were possessed by a European nation or nations. Assuming that United States' interest in the security of Western Europe continues, it might appear to them to be to their advantage to support such developments, or at least not to impede them. It would also be in accordance with their

general aim to see European nations bearing a greater degree of responsibility for their own defence. This, however, would all need to be balanced against their own fear of involvement in a potential escalation which they could not control.

The German Position

44. The position of the Federal Republic of Germany is of cardinal importance. They have signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and are firmly wedded to the United States' "nuclear guarantee." Their situation as the most likely battlefield of Europe is only tolerable if the likelihood of war in any form is diminished by a defence posture which includes a credible nuclear guarantee as well as conventional forces of sufficient defensive power. This attitude must be borne in mind when British policy on future nuclear weapons is considered as it is possible that the Germans could move in the direction of neutrality were their faith in the credibility of NATO strategy as a guarantee of their own security to be severely eroded. Germany would certainly react strongly against any presaged Anglo-French nuclear dominance in Europe. In the end it is probable that the German attitude would be very largely swayed by that of the United States.

The French Position

45. The French maintain their twin beliefs that without strategic nuclear weapons a great nation is incomplete and that a strategic nuclear force is only credible when used to protect the homeland of the possessor. Thus they must view the United Kingdom's possession of a strategic nuclear capability as logical but credible only in the defence of the United Kingdom. Their attitude is likely to be one of practical co-operation if it suits their interests but of continued scepticism about the credibility of such a deterrent capability in any sort of NATO role.

46. In one further sense the French position bears very directly on that of the United Kingdom. In political terms it has been argued in the past that the possession of nuclear weapons gives Britain a seat at the 'top table'. It may be said that the history of the last ten years does not bear this out. On the other hand, while possession of a nuclear capability does not make Britain a superpower it does give her special status among the second class powers, particularly in NATO and we believe will do so in the future enlarged European Community. If we relinquished our nuclear weapons there would certainly be a diminution of our prestige, particularly in the European Community. From this point of view the existence of the French deterrent is a strong political argument for continuing to have a British deterrent. France seeks to make political profit out of her strategic nuclear force and if she were the only European nation with this capability her prestige in Europe and in the Community might be even greater.

ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A UNITED KINGDOM
STRATEGIC NUCLEAR DETERRENTGeneral

47. We now consider the essential characteristics which a British strategic nuclear deterrent should possess in order to produce a sufficient level of effectiveness to deter Soviet aggression.

48. It is convenient at this point to repeat the description of deterrence with which we began this paper:

"Deterrence implies the evident ability to inflict on the Homeland of a potential aggressor a degree of damage he would not regard as tolerable in the context of the objectives he might wish to obtain; together with the creation of sufficient belief in his mind that this damage might, in fact, be inflicted."

49. For our ability to be evident two things would be required: our weapon system must be known to be sufficient for their tasks; and since it must be made clear to an enemy that these systems would survive any attempt at pre-emptive strike, our retaliatory capability must be invulnerable. The creation of belief in the mind of the potential aggressor that he would sustain unacceptable damage demands that he could neither be certain to defend himself from it nor certain to be able to destroy it by pre-emptive attack. He must also be brought to believe that our will would not fail.

50. Thus absolute knowledge by him of our capability to strike or to survive pre-emptive attack may not be necessary. It may be enough that he should suspect our capability to be sufficient to cause him unacceptable damage; that he should be unsure whether it could or could not survive a first strike; and that his belief in our will should be sufficient to inhibit his actions. However if our weapons systems are known by us not to be adequate to their tasks, in physical terms, and if our retaliatory capability is, in fact, vulnerable, there is clearly a major element of bluff in our policy; and our deterrent becomes unconvincing not only to ourselves but to the enemy.

51. It can however be argued that permanent invulnerability, although desirable, is not absolutely essential to deterrence and that no major enemy attack would be launched without an increase in tension. Thus the possibility of a period of political warning, on which NATO planning is already largely based, might suggest that a deterrent force need not be held at all times at the highest state of readiness. However, in view of the Soviet ability to launch a surprise attack against the United Kingdom, and thus to pre-empt our own strategic nuclear capability by a first strike, were it not already deployed in a retaliatory posture, and the absolutely central place in a nation's defence policy which a strategic nuclear force must hold, any degradation of the requirement of invulnerable capability - e.g. an "occasional deterrent" - would involve self-evident dangers. We should be placing absolute reliance on the factor of warning time.

52. This might, in certain circumstances, be defended. Were it to emerge that a permanently invulnerable deterrent were absolutely beyond this country's resources it would clearly be necessary to assess with great care whether the dangers we have described above were balanced by the advantages of staying, albeit vulnerable, in the nuclear business. A separate study has been commissioned on the so-called "Poor Man's Deterrent" showing the practical options which might exist. It can however certainly be argued that an occasional deterrent is more dangerous to the possessor than none at all.

53. The criterion of inducing in the enemy's mind sufficient belief that we might resort to strategic nuclear action depends, in the first instance, on the factor of political will. There is nothing useful to be said about this. It also depends, however, upon the potential enemy's knowledge that our control systems exist and are sufficient to give us the power of independent national action. Any United Kingdom deterrent force must include this capability.

54. Lastly, we consider, in the rest of this part of our paper, the very difficult question of the degree of damage which a potential enemy would regard as unacceptable.

Damage Infliction - Assessing the Prize

55. The level of effectiveness required, however difficult to establish, is crucial to determining quality and quantity and thus in establishing the cost of whatever system is selected. It is however so far impossible to establish any finite conclusions from the strategic systems which at present exist. We know the United States damage criterion; and we know that the Soviet Union have not undertaken major aggression. We do not know that the latter is a consequence of the former, and we do not know whether, if it is, any lower level of effectiveness would have deterred. The question may be expressed as "how many Soviet cities need to be able to be destroyed to achieve a deterrent effect?", and it is immediately clear that, since the answer essentially derives from assumptions about Soviet psychology it must be highly speculative. Yet much depends on it.

56. United States' calculations of the capability she requires have to be based on the possibility that the Russians might be prepared to run very high risks indeed, and to undergo a level of destruction which other countries would regard as unacceptable if in so doing she was able to eliminate the other nuclear super-power from the next few hundred years of world history; the United States thus feels that she needs to convince Russia beyond all possible doubt that if she attacked the continental United States, she would not survive as a nation to enjoy her "victory".

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SECTION 3(4)

of weapons.

this requires hundreds

57. In Europe, however, the prizes for Russia are not so great and the stakes not so high; the objective is not all or nothing. Whatever risks Russia might calculate she would have to run in eliminating or absorbing Western Europe, she would still have to take into consideration the existence of the United States' retaliatory capability. Thus the criterion of deterrence for Europe needs to be based on a judgement of the value which at any time the Russians might attach to the prizes to be gained by attacking Europe and of the damage to their homeland they would be prepared to accept in the attempt. Since the advantage is obviously at a lower level than that offered by the destruction of the United States in a deliberate super-power confrontation, it is reasonable to suppose that the Soviet Union would not be prepared to accept as great a degree of damage.

58. However should the Soviet Union consider that the United States would be reluctant to conduct a suicidal escalation it can be argued that the prize - Europe, and the absolute security of the Soviet Western frontier - could be regarded by the Soviets as highly worthwhile. This fact suggests that even the minimum deterrent level required may be high.

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63.

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SECTION 3(4)

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ANNEX A TO
COS 45/72
(Continued)

68.

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69. Although our review has considered exclusively deterrence to Soviet action, it has been assessed (5) that a modest increase to any future strategic force would probably suffice to provide the capability additionally to deter lesser powers from threat or blackmail, with the possible exception of China; alternatively the United Kingdom's tactical nuclear capability might be suitable for this purpose. The amount and type of damage required to deter China would need separate assessment if and when a threat to the United Kingdom from China is discerned. Any resulting requirement for a capability to deter China would have to be examined in the light of the strategic nuclear capability to be provided for the deterrence of the Soviet Union.

CONCLUSIONS

70. The main justification for the possession of a nuclear deterrent is to provide the ultimate guarantee of national security and sovereignty, and to protect national interests where conventional defences are no longer effective. Without it, the United Kingdom has no means of its own of deterring nuclear attack or large-scale conventional aggression by a nuclear power, and countering nuclear blackmail. We would view such a situation with the gravest misgivings.

Note:

5. LTWP Study Group 407/102/37/16/4980.

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(Continued)

A British deterrent force is of value in NATO in that it provides the Alliance with a European contribution to the overall deterrent, and a second centre of decision for nuclear retaliation. Other than France no European member possesses this capability. If British deterrent force did not exist, the United States would have monopoly of NATO's nuclear power. Conversely the necessity for such European element becomes stronger as the American nuclear guarantee comes progressively less credible.

In both contexts the value of the British deterrent depends upon decision to use it remaining under unfettered national control, for this to be clearly seen to be so. There is no justification maintaining a force which is purely an adjunct to the United States' deterrent and the use of which is entirely under American control. Our present dependence on the United States for material assistance, and our reliance for intelligence, does not amount to control.

It is difficult to show that possession of a nuclear deterrent confers on Britain any special status world-wide. But it is questionable that our position in NATO and in Europe would be very different if we were not a nuclear power. It would be undesirable for France to be the only such power in Europe.

With regard to the likely attitude of our principal allies to possession of our own nuclear capabilities:

- a. The United States may come to welcome the strengthening of the European policy of the Alliance which a British capability helps to provide. This, however, has to be considered against possible United States' disenchantment with a capability for escalation to the strategic level which she herself cannot control.
- b. Germany is likely to be much influenced by the attitude of the United States; she would not wish any development which either seemed to weaken United States' involvement in Europe, or appeared to portend an Anglo-French dominance of the Continent.
- c. The attitude of France is likely to be guided by her self-interest in terms of possible collaboration, and her scepticism as to whether our nuclear capability could be regarded as significant in Allied terms.

As to the level of effectiveness required:

- a. The force, and its system of control, must at all times be able to remain effective in the face of pre-emptive attack. The alternative would be to place absolute reliance on the factor of warning time.

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(Concluded)

b.

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c. Our assessment of the likely development of the Soviet defences (taking into account such limitations as may arise from a SAL agreement) leads us to conclude that we shall be unable to maintain this criterion in full unless our strategic nuclear force has the ability to penetrate to and strike certain targets within the Soviet defensive system, by whatever means, and that whatever the development of Soviet defences, this ability to penetrate must ensure for us an ability to strike what the Soviets themselves must regard as crucially worthy of defence. It thus becomes the principal criterion of effectiveness in considering the level of threat we should pose.